Curriculum Content and the Issue of Relevance in the 21st Century Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The need to make curriculum content relevant so that learners can apply what they learned in school upon graduation, has been emphasised. Issues bothering on curriculum content, philosophy of pragmatism, 21st century classroom, and relevance have been highlighted in this paper. It was recommended that: All stakeholders in education - teachers, school administrators, government should adapt to changes that the 21st Century presents particularly in the area of technological advancements; For the fact that knowledge can quickly become obsolete in this era, learners should be equipped with problem solving skills so that they will be able to face contemporary problem; Curriculum content should be made relevant to the extent that what learners learn will be useful to them in their day-to-day activities.

Keywords: Curriculum Content, Philosophy of Pragmatism, 21st Century Classroom, Relevance

1. INTRODUCTION

If there is anything that is so predominant in today's world, it is change. The world is changing and every sphere of life –culture, business, religion, technology, etc., is adapting to the ever changing culture. Knowledge is on the increase in today's world and curriculum content becomes obsolete very easily. Most times, it is difficult for learners to apply what they learned in schools few years afterwards. The school system needs to change just as every sector is changing. The knowledge learners acquire from school needs to be relevant and meet their present needs as individuals, as well as the needs of the society.

A glance into the classroom will show that very little has changed over the past 30 or more years. In terms of facilities though, there could be changes especially in private schools such as better lighting, air conditioners, smart boards, computers, and so on. To a very large extent, resistance to change has been a trademark of education.For some stakeholders in the education industry, change in curriculum merely means additional workload, and as such, they resist the change and keep on doing what they have been used to, and end up not preparing learners for the challenges of the time (Johnson and McElroy, n.d.; Bluestein, 2012).

In this 21st century, education should be relevant to the world of work. Guthrie cited in Bluestein (2012) points out that teachers do not teach what learners need to know in order to succeed in this modern world. Johnson and McElroy (n. d.) vehemently state, that if education has not kept up with the changing times, then one has to question its relevance in preparing learners for the world of today, not to talk about the world of tomorrow. This is an era that what an individual thinks he knows becomes outdated sooner than he thinks.

The need to transform formal education to be relevant for today's world cannot be over-emphasised. Till date, the practice remains a process involving teachers passing on information to learners in an attempt to cover the curriculum content in preparation for tests or examinations. The school keeps preparing learners for jobs that does not exist and so most of them graduate and discover that they are unfit in the labour market. Prensky (2001) remarks that today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach, stressing the need to reconsider both the methodology and the content of what is being taught in the classroom. This paper x-rays curriculum content in relation to the issue of relevance in a 21st century classroom.

2. CURRICULUM CONTENT

Curriculum is the planned experiences offered to the learner under the guidance of the school. According to Busari (1998), curriculum can be conceived as all what, how, when and where of learning experiences. One of the elements of the curriculum is, content, the other elements are: objective, learning experiences, organisation and integration of learning experiences and content and evaluation. Content is the

subject matter of instruction. It encompasses the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values that learners have to learn for them to experience a change in their behaviour in the desired direction. Nicholls and Nicholls (1978) as cited in Duru (2011) described content as the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to be learned. Content addresses the issue of 'what to teach', that is what learners should learn. It can be viewed as representing all the subject matter that learners are offered in schools.Busari points out that curriculum should contain realistic and teachable knowledge and value claims.

Curriculum content as defined by Saylor and Alexander (1966) cited in Busari (1998 p.45) is"those facts, observations, data, discernments, sensibilities, designs and solutions drawn from what the minds of men have comprehended from experiences and those mind that recognise or rearrange these products of experience into laws, ideas, concepts, generalisations, principles, plans and solutions". Busari asserts that curriculum content can be seen as events to be learned. He defined it as the knowledge, skills perceptions and attitudes to be learned.

Since the inception of formal education, there have been different ideas of what should be taught in schools. Various schools of thought - Perenialists, Essentialist, Existentialists, Pragmatists, etc., came up with what the school curriculum should be made up of. While the Perennialists and the Essentialists for instance hold that curriculum contains permanent truth that should be taught to the learner, in order to improve his mind and construct his behavioral patterns into useful citizenry, the Existentialists and the Pragmatists do not agree that curriculum contains permanent truth to be learned, rather they hold that curriculum is a dynamic package, and that the nature, needs and interest of the learner are important and should be considered in educating the learner (Busari, 1998; Ochoma, 2017).

3. SELECTION OF CURRICULUM CONTENT

If education is to engender wisdom as its ultimate goal, it must be about the development of the mind which is in some sense, determined by the growth and structure of knowledge from which curriculum content should be drawn (Adegoke, 1998). The question of what knowledge is and what knowledge is most worth are perennial challenges to content selection. The nature of knowledge and its definition is a problem.

Knowledge is a familiarity, awareness or understanding of something such as facts, information or skills acquired through experience by perceiving, discovering or learning (Librarianship Studies and Information Technology, 2017). It can be seen as consisting of specific facts, concepts, principles, generalisations, theories, skills, attitudes and processes at varying levels of concretisation, abstraction and sophistication (Adegoke, 1998). There are different kinds of knowledge and it is from the different kinds of knowledge that curriculum content should be drawn.

There is so much for learners to learn in school and the time available for school education is not sufficient for learners to learn 'everything' as there are always new things to learn, as long as researches are carried out. This is why a deliberate effort is made to select what should make up the content of the curriculum at a given time. With knowledge explosion, particularly in this 21st century, it is becoming very difficult for stakeholders in the field of education to determine what the curriculum content should be, as there is a great tendency that what is taught today, may not be valid in the world of tomorrow. It is the duty of curriculum planners to decide on what the content of the curriculum should be. Some emergent principlesof content selection discussed in Adegoke (1998 p. 90) are as follow:

➢ Integration of knowledge is an important issue;
➢ Interest, value and preference of instruction must be taking into consideration;
➢ Selection should be made, bearing in mind relevance, scope and coverage
➢ Validity is essential. This implies close connection between content and goals which it is intended to serve;
➢ Social utility, social responsibility, learnability, etc. are vital and should be considered while selecting curriculum content,

Prensky (2001) identifies two kinds of content: Legacy content and Future content. While Legacy content includes reading, arithmetic, logical thinking, understanding the writings and ideas of the past, and so on, Future content includes software, hardware, robotics, nanotechnology, genomics, and so on, as well as ethics, politics, sociology, languages and other things that go with them. Prensky submits that educators should think of how to teach both Legacy and Future content in the language of the Digital Natives.

It is imperative to note that as the value claims of a society change, the knowledge inherent in a curriculum must be responsive to the change. Knowledge is subject to change in a changing world. In Nigerian context, the future curriculum according to Busari, should focus on the gap created between education

intentions and education realities, and the future curriculum should empower school learners with knowledge relevance and utilisation. It is necessary that whatever is taught in school should be of practical application in everyday life and of definite use (Busari, 1998; Commenius as cited in Busari, 1998).

4. CURRICULUM CONTENT AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF PRAGMATISM

One school of thought that believes that knowledge is changeable in a world of change is Pragmatism. Pragmatists hold that education should be about life and growth. Learners are to be taught things that are practical for life and be encouraged to grow into better people. Practical learning and experiential learning hence, are two important elements of Pragmatism. While practical learning focuses on the real world application of lessons, experiential learning involves learning through experience (Boyd, 2014).

Education according to Pragmatists, embody those important, practical and useful activities which make man self-dependent and useful member of a society (Bluemington, 2018). Pragmatists advocate teaching the child 'how to think' rather than 'what to think'. The curriculum of the Pragmatists is child (learner) and activity centred as well as process oriented. It concentrates on the process of learning. The curriculum is viewed as a vehicle which enables the learner develop capability to construct knowledge for wise decision making (Omiebi-Davids, 2006; Achuonye and Ajoku, 2013; Agina-Obu, 2016; Ochoma, 2017).

Pragmatism lays emphasis on the principle of utility (that is, usefulness and functionality), which is one of the criteria for selection of content. This criterion is based on the philosophy of learning for use in and out of the school setting (Duru, 2011). To ascertain if content is useful, two questions that need to be answered as outlined in Duru (p.165) are:
1. Will the content help the learner solve problems of life?
2. Will the content help the learner find a place in the society?

The Philosophy of Pragmatism is vital while deciding on what the curriculum content should comprise of in the 21st century classroom as it holds that learners should be taught how to solve problems in practical setting. Moreover, the fact that it holds that knowledge is changeable in a world of change gives it an edge over other philosophical views of the curriculum like the Perennialists and the Essentialists. At a time when knowledge is on the increase, the philosophy of Pragmatism will go a long way to make what the learner learns, relevant.

5. FEATURES OF 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOM

A 21st century classroom is technology-driven and a community of inquiry, where both the teacher and the learner collaborate with each other to grow understanding of the world around them (Preece and Bularafa, 2015, as cited in Ochoma, 2018). The classrooms are said to be moving from the traditional teacher-centric model of "I teach" to a learner initiated "we learn" model with the push toward the use of mobile technology (Norris and Soloway, 2011 as cited in McDonald and Battaglia, 2015) The classroom is learner-centred; it focuses on preparing learners to become productive members of the world of work.

Innovative teaching techniques such as flipped classroom, collaborative learning technique, project-based learning, skill-based learning, gamification, and the likes are features of a 21st century classroom. Such techniques afford the learner the opportunity to participate in the educational activities. Agina-Obu (2016) points out that education is an active process which demands active participation of the learner. A learner learns better when he is actively involved in an activity. Bluestein (2011) observes that strategies that will engage learners who have spent their entire lives surrounded by computers, videogames, digital music players, cell phones, and other tools of the digital age are needed in teaching in today's classroom. According to Arora (2019), new-age teaching methods which are tech-centred are wholly compatible with the contemporary job markets and they are rendering traditional models of teaching and learning obsolete and at the same time, transforming education worldwide

Techniques used in a 21st century classroom lay emphasise on hands-on learning techniques that will enable the learner put knowledge and skills learned into practice. Gonzalez (2018) points out that for learners to learn facts, concepts and ideas they are taught, they have to experience those things in a way that rises above abstract words on paper. Learners must have to process the facts, concepts and ideas by way of putting to practice what they have learned. The learner is the focal point in a 21st century classroom and how he learns is of utmost importance. McDonald and Battaglia (2015) observe that there is a growing need for educators to adapt to the 21st century learners.

6. THE LEARNER FIGURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOM

The learner is the focal point of any teaching/ learning activity. It is the learner's behaviour that is to

change as a result of exposure to learning activities. The learner must be ready and willing before learning can take place. Being ready entails the individual having prerequisite ability that enables him to learn. This cuts across cognitive, physiological, psychological and intellectual ability as well as the learner's attitude (Ochoma, 2016).

The 21st century learner is used to receiving information very fast; he has little or no patience for lecture as a mode of instruction; he wants to get things done very quickly, in a www.com way of doing things. The 21st century learner is a native speaker of the digital language of the computer. According to Prensky (2001), today's student has spent his entire live surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, cellphones, and all other tools of the digital age. He thinks and processes information differently from his predecessors, his teacher being one of them. The teacher of a 21st century learner will have adapt to the learner figure of the 21st century classroom if teaching and learning will be meaningful, successful and relevant in this age.

There are some set of skills referred to as 21st century skills being recognised as attributes that separate learners who are prepared for a more complex life and work environment in the 21st century. The skills are: critical thinking and problem solving; communication; collaboration; and creativity. The 21st century learner upon graduation should possess these skills.

7. THE TEACHER FIGURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOM

Doing the same thing the same way will amount to getting the same result. The teacher figure of the 20th century is unsuitable for a 21st century classroom. According to Prensky, the biggest problem facing education today is that our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language. For success to be attained in a 21st century classroom, the teacher must learn the digital language mostly understood by the 21st century learner.

The 21st century teacher must have to change some of his practices. For instance, there must be a paradigm shift from a teacher-centred instruction to a learner-centred instruction. The 21st century classroom teachers need to possess qualities that will enable them transform education to be relevant for 21st century learner today and even tomorrow. The 21st century teacher needs to possess ability to:

- ➤ know his learners and their mindset. This goes beyond knowing the name of the learner. The teacher should be able to know how the learner thinks, his mental disposition and capability.
- ➤ understand how learners learn. In today's world, information is readily available and so learners are not limited to what the teacher tells them. They learn through the aid of one technological device or the other.
- ➤ be creative in developing materials/tasks/contents that have value in themselves. Being creative entails breaking away from the usual way of doing things and creating new ways.
- ➤ develop meaningful relationships with learners in order to gain their trust, as they would not give their trust automatically.
- ➤ be flexible in adapting to new ways of how learners learn. This will entail the teacher constantly updating his knowledge and skills in order to meet the changing needs of the 21st century learners.
- ➤ be aware of learners' needs for future development. The essence of all the education and learning is to fit into the labour market. Careers and jobs that were once pathways for learners upon graduation, are today, lost. A 21st century teacher should be aware and ready to guide learners in their future career development plan.
- ➤ use technological devices. A 21st century teacher must be enthusiastic about the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). Learners today are digital natives. No analogue teacher will function effectively if he does not migrate to the digital world, and speak the digital language (Latham, 2016).

A teacher in the 21st century classroom must note that educating the learner is more challenging now than before. He should as well bear in mind that what learners need in this era is the ability to think critically and explore whatever environment they find themselves. The following roles are crucial to the success of a 21st century classroom teacher:

- Acting as a facilitator;
- Establishing a safe supportive and positive learning environment for all kinds of learners, their individual differences notwithstanding;
- Fostering cooperation among learners within the classroom which will enhance collaboration, as collaboration is a vital skill the 21st century learner must possess to strive;
- Encouraging learners to be inquisitive about learning tasks and being internally motivated; and so on.

Above all, the 21ˢᵗ century teacher must be able to create a classroom that is engaging. Matthew (2019) remarks that at the heart of all learners' engagement is the idea of learners' ownership and connection to the content that is, the "what" of the curriculum. For learners to take ownership and connect to the content, the content must be relevant.

8. CURRICULUM CONTENT AND THE ISSUE OF RELEVANCE

Relevance is one of the most crucial aspects of teaching and learning. Roberson (2013) sees relevance as the perception that something is interesting and worth knowing. As pointed out in The Glossary of Education Reform (2014), the term relevance in education refers to learning experiences that are either directly applicable to the personal aspirations, interests, or cultural experiences of learners or that are connected in some way to real-world issues, problems, and contexts. Agwu (2009) opines that the content of the curriculum must be relevant to the needs of the society and the needs of the learners. Briggs (2014) points out that relevance is a key factor in providing a learning context in which learners construct their own understanding of course material. Sinclair and Lillis (1983) cited in Agwu justify relevance from several perspectives:

➢ On educational grounds, helping to ease contact between the child and his studies;
➢ On psychological grounds, aids the socialisation of the child;
➢ On economic utilitarian grounds, facilitates the transfer of useful knowledge and development of skills to the entire population (p. 272).

The school is experiencing problems in terms of making content relevant because of the changing nature of the society and the learner. Guthrie as cited in Bluestein (2011) observes that the school system does not teach what learners need to know in order to succeed in this modern world. According to Kennedy (2013), curricula need to become more relevant to the society than they are today. Learners learn effectively when content is relevant. Relevance is a key component to intrinsically motivate learners' learning. Sometimes, a content may not be inherently interesting, but once it has been established that it is relevant, learners find it easier to learn. They remain motivated all through the teaching-learning session because the content is relevant. They can even work outside the classroom on such content simply because it is relevant, it is worth knowing. Lynch (2017) points out that relevance is an effective motivational tool for capturing learners' interest.

Teaching is to a large extent, the art of psychological persuasion (Lynch, 2017). One thing a teacher must do in the course of lesson delivery is to persuade, convince learners that what they are being taught is relevant, that is, worth thinking about deeply. Relevance can be established through showing how theory can be applied in practice, establishing relevance to local cases, relating instructional content to everyday applications, or finding applications in current issues. Learners need a personal connection to what they are being taught by engaging them emotionally; connecting the new information with knowledge that they have previously acquired. Without which, they disengage from the learning task, forget what they are being taught and also lose motivation (Briggs, 2014).

It is pertinent to note that for content to be relevant, it must satisfy the criterion of utility. Utility means usefulness. A content that is relevant must have utility value. Such content relates to learners' real-life experiences, aspirations and immediate needs (Mkpa and Izugba, 2012).Majority of the curriculum content taught today lack utility value and so they represent the Saber-Tooth curriculum. The Saber-Tooth curriculum is a parable of stagnate curriculum reform, which recounts how a Paleolithic school curriculum became obsolete when the Ice Age came. Curriculum as taught today is a Saber-Tooth curriculum. It was established in the 19ᵗʰ century and despite the fact that times have changed, the fundamental and sacred aspects of the 19ᵗʰ century curriculum remain with us today(Biffle, 2016).

A curriculum should be dynamic and not static and so from time to time, there is need for change if the curriculum and the educational system of a society is to be relevant. A curriculum should preserve the past values held by a society, but not limited by it (Ochoma, 2016). It is necessary that the school system in the 21ˢᵗ century should embrace changes that the era has to offer while upholding past values that are still relevant. One of such changes that the school system must compulsorily adapt is technological changes.

8. THE WAY FORWARD

Technology in the 21ˢᵗcentury has become very much part of the world. The teacher should know that technology has come to stay and so the earlier it is embraced it, the better. For content to be relevant in this age, the teacher, schools and educational system generally must embrace technological advances. Culture has changed, likewise the learners. The language most learners understand in this age is the digital language. Teaching cannot be made relevant until the teacher learns to speak the digital language. It is a necessity that

teachers migrate to the digital world in order to be suitable to face the challenges of the 21st century classroom.

The principles of Pragmatism are vital in making curriculum content relevant in this 21st century. Rather than the curriculum content solely focusing on the traditional subjects, efforts should be geared towards teaching the learners to be able to think and find solutions to problems. In order words, learners should be equipped with problem solving skills that will help them solve contemporary problems and adapt to changes the world throw at them.

9. CONCLUSION

The 21st century classroom is different from the classroom of earlier centuries. The upsurge of knowledge and technology has made the century peculiar and unique. Learners have access to knowledge more in this century than previous centuries. The teacher in a 21st century classroom functions as a facilitator. Moreover, learners speak the digital language which the teacher, more or less struggling to migrate to the digital world, must endeavour to adapt to if he must function effectively. Content should be made relevant to enable learners engage in meaningful learning and thus prepare them to face the challenges of their time.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the over discourse, it is recommended that:

1. All stakeholders in education – teachers, school administrators, government should adapt to changes that the 21st century presents particularly in the area of technological advancement.
2. For the fact that knowledge can quickly become obsolete in this era, learners should be equipped with problem solving skills so that they will be able to face contemporary problem.
3. Curriculum content should be made relevant to the extent that what learners' learn will be useful to them in their day-to-day activities.

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